

Sexual Health Guide

IRAQUEER
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INTRODUCTION

Sexual Health is a key aspect of our overall health. Ignoring our sexual health will directly affect our overall health. And for us to become sexually healthy, we need to first understand what sexual health means and what the components.

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

The lack of information and resources that talks about sexuality, and sexual health in Iraq/KurdistanRegion especially in local languages are very limited, and often inaccurate as they are often based on values and old teachings that make talking about these questions a taboo, instead of basing the resources on scientific facts and tackling these issues from a neutral and human rights point of view. That makes them unreliable. Not to mention that none of those resources provide accurate information about the LGBT+ community.

In this guide, we try to fill this gap by providing information based on the most recent scientific resources, and discussing topics that are often sensitive in a way that shows human sexuality as a natural and important part of human lives which should in no way be associated with being taboo or shameful.

KEY DEFINITIONS

SEXUALITY A central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.

GENDER Refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. The different aspects that associate with certain genders (Gender identities) differ from a society to another.

SEX Is the biological characteristics of a person which is determined before birth. It's controlled by biological factors. While most people are either males or females, there are individuals who are intersex, and possess characteristics from both sexes. Sex can be changed if a person's biological characteristics did not match their gender identity. The different aspects of having a certain sex will not change from a society to another.

SEXUAL PRACTICE Refers to the act of performing intimate and sexual activities.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

LGBT+ An acronym that stands for Lesbians (Females attracted to females), Gays (Males attracted to males), Lesbians and Gays can also be referred to as Homosexuals (Individuals attracted to others from the same sex), Bisexuals (Individuals attracted to both males and females), Transsexuals (Individuals whom their biological sex doesn't align with their gender identity), and the (+) which stands for the other gender and sexual identities.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

WHAT ARE THE SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS?

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are infections that are commonly spread by sex, especially vaginal, anal and oral sex. They can also be transmitted through being exposed to surfaces and tools used by an infected individual like tooth brush, needles, and others.

These infections are common regardless of the kind of relationship or the sex of the partner(s) you are involved with. Whether you're involved in homosexual or heterosexual relationships, or both. Whether you're married and exclusive, or single and experimental; Any person who practices sex is exposed to infections.

WHAT KIND OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS ARE THERE?



- Bacterial STIs are caused by bacteria. They include Gonorrhea, Syphilis, and Chlamydia. They are curable especially if detected in an early stage. Sometimes if they were not cured, they could impact the brain and fertility. For bacterial infections, symptoms usually include pain while urinating, itching of the genitals, discharge from genitals, and redness. And sometimes, those symptoms can be easy to overlook. Ignoring the symptoms can result in serious health damages. These STIs can be easily treated by taking prescribed antibiotics.

- Parasitic STIs are caused by other organisms (pubic lice and scabies). These STIs are curable by anti-parasitic medications. Not treating some of those STIs could lead to infertility and problems during pregnancy parasitic infections, symptoms usually include pain while urinating, itching of the genitals, discharge from genitals, and redness. And sometimes, those symptoms can be easy to overlook. Ignoring the systems can result in serious health damages. These STIs can be easily treated by taking prescribed antibiotics.
- Viral STIs are caused by different viruses like HIV, HPV and Herpes. They are not curable, but with the modern medicine; these infections could be kept under control and in most cases people living with these infections can live a long and healthy life when taking the medicine. Not taking medicine could lead to death. While symptoms for viral infections are often invisible, but when they are visible they include fever, weakness, and itching.

HIV AND AIDS

Being infected with HIV (Human immunodeficiency Virus) interferes with your body's immune system. And if not treated, it can lead to AIDS which is a chronic, life-threatening disease.

There are several ways that people can get HIV from. The most common is to get infected from a partner who already has it. It can also be transmitted through unsafe sex, from a pregnant mother to her unborn child, exposure to an infected person's blood, or from using an infected person's tools like needles, toothbrushes, and blades.

HIV is a common infection among people who are sexual active, regardless of the biological sex of their partner(s).

What makes HIV dangerous is the fact that it often has no visible symptoms which makes it hard to detect unless getting tested.

Although there is no cure for HIV yet, in many countries individuals who are HIV+ have access to treatments that reduces the activity of the virus to an undetectable rate which allows the individual to live a normal and healthy life. But since these treatments are not available in Iraq/KurdistanRegion yet, and they are often expensive, it's important to focus on prevention. It's crucial to be safe even if both partners are HIV+ as unsafe sex could infect them with other STIs that could worsen their health.

TREATMENTS AND PREVENTION OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

Most STIs are treatable if detected in early stages. If not, they can be put under control with the right medications. But getting treated for STIs should always be under doctor's supervision. STIs are infectious and it's important to handle them in the right way.

But the best way to protect yourself is prevention. Practicing safe sex, using the right kind of condoms, keeping your oral and genital hygiene, and being informed about your partner(s)'s health status will all play vital roles in protecting you from getting infected.

In Iraq/Kurdistan Region where access to sexual health services are limited, and for LGBT+ individuals often risky; extra protective measures must be taken to reduce your needs for health care.

It is crucial to keep track of your sexual partners, and knowing their sexual history. The higher their number is, the higher the chance of you getting infected is.



CONDOMS

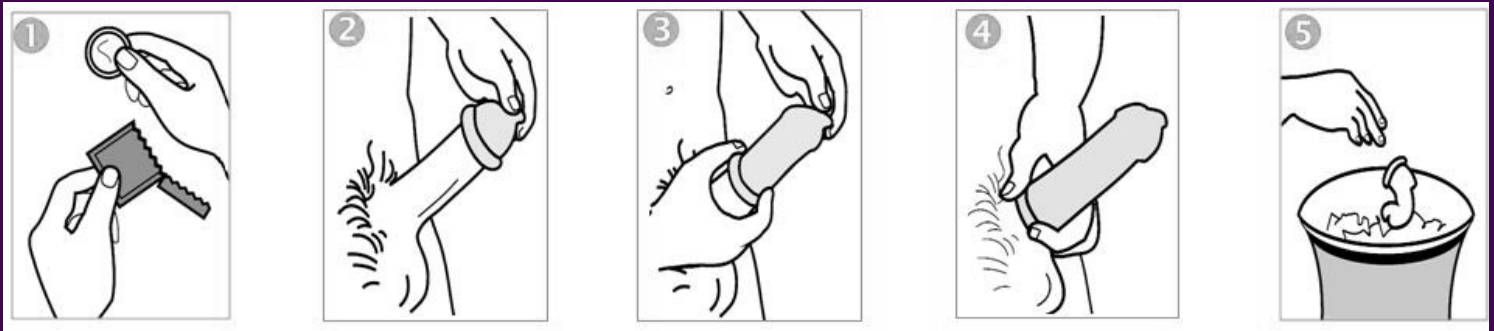
Although condoms do not provide 100% protection against all STIs, it is still considered the simplest and most effective way to protect yourself and limit the chances of getting infected. When using condoms, it's important to use lubricants as well to avoid the breakage of the condom. Store condoms in cool dry places. Male and female condoms shouldn't be used at the same time as they could stick to each other and/or break.

• How to Use Male Condoms

• Use new condoms

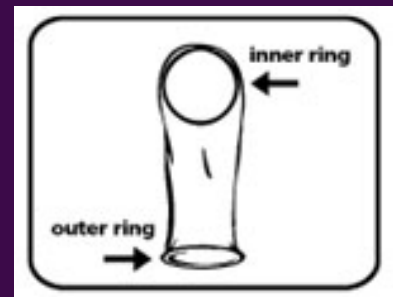
• Put the Condom on the top of the Penis, and roll it down. Apply lubricants before intercourse.

• Throw Condom Away



• How to Use Female Condoms

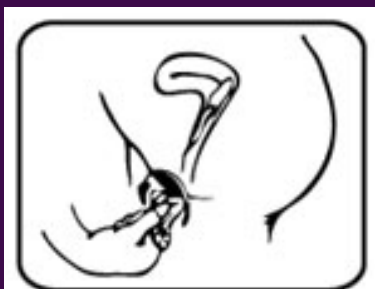
1. Use new condoms



2. Prepare and insert condom into the vagina before intercourse/ oral sex.



3. Remove Condom



4. Throw Condom Away



MENTAL HEALTH

We can't talk about sexual health, without talking about mental health at the same time. It's evident that both influence each other directly.

People who identify as LGBT+ in Iraq/KurdistanRegion face greater chances of being exposed to mental illness since they are exposed to more discrimination, and physical and verbal abuse, in addition to the fear and loneliness most people live in while going through the process of understanding and accepting their own identities. All this is accompanied by malpractice or refusal of services by a big number of psychiatrists.



Although seeking consultation and professional help for mental health problems is still hard and considered a “taboo” in Iraq/KurdistanRegion, that doesn't mean there aren't things one can do in their daily life that can help them.

Being LGBT+ (Non-heterosexual) is not a mental illness. This is a fact proven by some of the biggest social and medical institutes in the world including World Health Organisation, Doctors Without Borders, and The Lebanese Psychiatric Society. But the values and teachings in the country make it hard for the public to embrace new information that could create conflicts with their personal beliefs, which will result in rejecting and isolating LGBT+ individuals by the community.

All that aside, individuals who identify as LGBT+ individuals need to make an extra effort to cope with their environments, and make sure they live a healthy lifestyle and surround themselves by people whom they can trust and talk to, in addition to occupying their times with productive activities.

Going through the self discovery process should be about listening to their inner voice and reading multiple reliable resources. Some people discover their identities early in life, others need longer times to do so. An each individual does it in their own ways, there's no standard timing or methods to do so.

It is crucial for those individuals to take active steps to improve their mental health. Small steps like making new friends, volunteering, and playing different sports can allow individuals to express themselves in different ways, and help them discover different aspects of their identities.

SAFE BEHAVIOUR AND RISKY BEHAVIOUR



**ALWAYS
Use
Condoms**

**Inform/Be
Informed
About Your
Partner's
Health**

**Get Tested
Whenever
Possible**

**Connect and
Socialise
with People**

**Have an
Active
Lifestyle**

**Practising
Unsafe Sex**

**Sharing
Condoms,
Needles or
Other Tools
With Others**

**Using a
Condom
More Than
Once**

Self Harm

**Isolation
From
Society**



SEXUAL RIGHTS

Sexual rights are one of the main aspects of human rights, and are already recognised under the international human rights documents that have been signed by Iraq. In addition to the fact that there are several articles in the Iraq constitution that protect these rights.

There are certain rights guaranteed by the Iraqi law like the right to privacy in homes, the right to take legal actions against rapers, the right to take legal actions against honor crime committers, and the protection of girls against early marriage. Sexual harassment is also covered under the law except for when it happens within marriage.

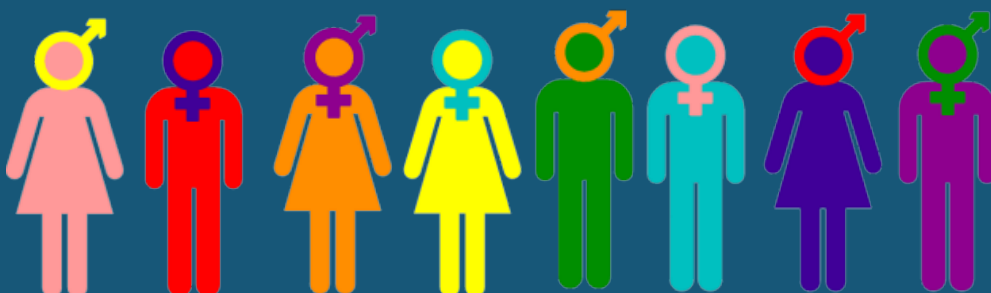
However, the Iraqi law allows many other violations to take place, and is usually not applied even when it guarantees protection, like the right to get an abortion unless the pregnancy endangers a women's health, and marital rape. Also, the right to get a divorce isn't equal.

When it comes to being LGBT+; the Iraqi law doesn't criminalise homosexuality, but it also does not protect it.

The rights that are not protected by the Iraqi legal system, are protected by the international human rights laws and conventions that have been agreed and signed by Iraq, and they include the right to:

- Obtain the highest attainable standard of sexual health
- Seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality; sexuality education.
- Respect for bodily integrity
- Choose their partners
- Decide to be sexually active or not. Pursue a satisfying and safe sexual life.
- Consensual sexual relations, and/or consensual marriage
- Decide whether or not and when to have children

Any violation to these rights are clear and direct violations to the government's commitment towards the Iraqi law and/or the international human rights standards, and individuals have the right to take legal actions to hold the violators accountable.



ABOUT IRAQUEER

IraQueer is a registered human rights nonprofit organisation that focuses on the LGBT+ community in Iraq / KurdistanRegion.

IraQueer's envisions an Iraq where the LGBT+ individuals are recognised and enjoy equal rights and responsibilities to the ones other individuals have.

IraQueer's mission is to empower the LGBT+ community in Iraq / KurdistanRegion through raising awareness and capacity building, and strengthening the LGBT+ community to lead the first queer movement in Iraq/ KurdistanRegion's public history.

For more info regarding this guide or referrals to physicians, therapists, or more resources, contact IraQueer.

You can reach IraQueer on

info@iraqueer.org
+46 76 238 3076 | WhatsApp & Viber
www.iraqueer.org

You can also find IraQueer on

Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | Youtube | LinkedIn

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